

Māmā • Pāpā • Tinā • Tamā

Mums and Dads

*Parents with experience of
mental illness share their
stories*

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The Dream Park

By Graham Johnson

This is all a dream Dad
I'm walking on the sky
The clouds are candy floss today
Around which I can fly

A fantail's kissed my nose Dad
The unicorns are here
The treetops ring with fairy lights
Talk to them if you dare

This swing's a magic carpet Dad
The fort's a castle strong
And I'm a queen and you're a king
And we can do no wrong

And if it's all a dream Dad
I'm walking in my sleep
And hoping that when I wake up
These memories I'll keep

Graham Johnson is a parent with experience of mental illness. A lot of his poetry is for and about his daughter. Graham's poetry has been instrumental in helping with his recovery.





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Foreword

Up to 50 percent of people who experience mental illness are parents. In this booklet 12 of these people share their stories to inspire others. Societal attitudes can often negate the role of parenting and many parents who experience mental illness have faced discrimination. We believe that parenting is a right and a privilege and people with experience of mental illness have as much right to become a parent as anyone else.



Sarah G's story

Sarah lives with her husband and two young sons.

I was diagnosed as having chronic severe depression with significant anxiety components at 17. When I first became unwell and went into hospital they tried a lot of different interventions and medication worked the best for me.

Because of my illness, it was anticipated that I could experience difficulties when I tried to have children. This was because of the high doses of medication and the risk of postnatal difficulties for someone with my type of illness. When I did get pregnant, at 27, I went to my GP. She immediately linked me with maternal mental health services and they were brilliant. They considered my situation, my history and my feelings about the pregnancy, labour and beyond.

Together we developed a plan which involved some medication changes. I remained on medication during my pregnancy after weighing up the risks of getting sick (if I didn't take it) and the impact on the foetus (if I did take it). The research reported no known implications from being on the medication but recommended that it would be better for the baby to be born free of it, so we planned a controlled withdrawal two weeks prior to my due date.

Once the withdrawal started I got unwell almost straight away and at a certain point of un-wellness the physical responses associated with my pregnancy stopped.

Being quite unwell, and not really in a state to make any decisions on my own, my husband, parents, brother, sister and I had a meeting to discuss the advice of my psychiatrist and obstetrician. Everyone felt that I should go back on my medication. They believed that an improvement in my mental wellbeing would trigger the physical things to start up again and give me a chance of going into labour naturally. So, the medication was reinstated and I started getting better mentally. After a while the physical features of advanced stage pregnancy

"My mental illness is just one of the myriad of things that are part of our family life."



returned as well. I went into labour naturally the night before the scheduled inducement. It was a difficult labour and I ended up having an emergency Caesarean but it all turned out well in the end. We had a healthy baby boy.

For the next two years, the vulnerable time, I was monitored and had regular appointments with mental health services.

I had resigned from my job prior to the baby being born so I could concentrate on everything that comes with being a new mum. One thing that I find really impacts on my mental wellbeing is lack of sleep. I found this difficult at the start and then I adjusted so that when the baby slept I slept. I was sleeping lots and the house was a mess, the dishes weren't done, the laundry wasn't done but the baby and I were well.

With my second pregnancy I was linked with maternal mental health services once again. We decided that I'd stay on the medication for the duration. Apparently this is now common practice, they no longer recommend withdrawing off my type of medication prior to the birth. Because I'd been medicated throughout the pregnancy they kept a close eye on Harry when he was first born but there were no problems.

Jack is now five and has just started school, and Harry is one. My husband and I have been together since we were 15 so he was around when I first got sick. It's nothing unusual for him, it's part of who we are and we just get on with it. Sometimes Mummy has time-out because of her mental illness, sometimes Daddy has time-out because he has the flu and sometimes Jack has time-out because he misbehaves. My mental illness is just one of the myriad of things that are part of our family life.

I am the Managing Director of Case Consulting which is a consumer mental health consultancy company. We undertake a lot of different work in the mental health sector including research, education and training and do a lot of work with the Like Minds Like Mine project to counter stigma and discrimination associated with mental illness.



Alex's story

"I am very aware of the power of making ill-informed judgements and I apply that to the way I raise my son."

Alex lives with his partner and one-year-old son. He works full time.

I was diagnosed with schizophrenia in my early 20s, about 10 years ago and spent about five years going between my family home, supported accommodation and various psychiatric hospitals. A psychiatrist who was brought out of retirement put me on a number of different anti-psychotic medications and didn't monitor me very closely. My weight shot up from 90 kilograms to around 135 kilograms and I was completely stupefied. I was supposed to be phasing off one medication and on to another but for some reason I was stuck on both at quite high levels, taking a cocktail of medications and in a total fog. One of my strongest memories is sitting in my psychiatrist's office and she asked me what the worst thing was. I remember gazing out the window with blank eyes and saying that I didn't know who I was anymore.

After ending up back in hospital I was fortunate to be assigned to a really good clinician, she was a lifesaver, who saw what was going on. She said I needed to come off my medication. It sounds strange, but I was apprehensive about coming off my meds.

I quickly began to develop a sense of who I was, how the world worked, and how I could make my way in it. I slotted back into the 'normal' world really quickly. I left hospital, got a flat, started working part time and went to university. I'd needed to have that ability given to me and then I had to use it in a certain way as I went about my worldly business. I didn't feel I had to behave especially carefully or tread on eggshells though. I was reasonably confident because it was all so enjoyable and amazing.

About a year after coming off my medication I had a manic episode. It sounds strange, but this was a good thing because finally people could see what I was



experiencing and it was then that it was defined as being bipolar disorder. In retrospect it was a relief but at the time it was absolutely nightmarish. Despite being diagnosed with schizophrenia originally I had never experienced psychosis but the mania was a form of it where I was very high, an 'I can conquer the world' sort of thing, and I felt even more witty and interesting than usual! The hardest part was putting it all back together again after the crash and depression. I was put back on lithium and continue to take it to this day. It's something I take, it works, and I don't think about it a heck of a lot.

I'm now in a loving and stable relationship and a father. Back when I was in a tiny room in hospital, having a partner, a child and a mortgage would have seemed totally unrealistic and impossible. Now I don't find it that difficult to give myself a pinch when I'm having a crap day to remind myself that things aren't really too bad at all.

I think a really important part of being a parent with experience of mental illness, and going through the mental health system, is that you come out with empathy and you are stronger than most people in a number of ways. I'm quite open about my experience of bi-polar disorder and sometimes get judged negatively so as a dad I'm very aware of the power of making ill-informed judgements and I apply that to the way I raise my son. I won't judge him on things that are trivial and trifling.

Being adaptable is also a very important quality to have as a parent and I know from experience that you never know what's coming round the corner. Whether you like it or not you're going to be forced into situations that will be 50-50 – when you'll either be empathetic and listen, or you're going to withdraw and run away and become very defensive. I think I'm lucky to have gone through it and popped out the other side.



Darcey's story

"It was very scary to be questioned about all my past actions, and having to justify myself to everyone."

Darcey shares custody of her two primary-school-aged boys. She is a freelance editor and the coordinator for a Speakers Bureau.

In 2001 after a series of breakdowns I was diagnosed by mental health services. I was 27 at the time with two young sons and a partner.

After the breakdown of my relationship with my husband I believed that it was most important to secure the custody of my children. I sought legal advice and representation to have a custody agreement put in place. When I left my husband I had taken my children and gone to Women's Refuge. I was angry all the time and always looking outside myself for someone to blame.

It took more than a year for our case to be heard in the family court. During this time I attended group and individual counselling sessions. It was these sessions, and the people I met there, that kept me alive.

When I finally received the dates for our court hearing I began to organise childcare. My eldest son was taken to school while my youngest son was looked after by a friend. A close friend, whom I had met through a women's group, had organised her own childcare so that she could be with me the whole time.

I focused on staying calm and grounded, knowing that I had a strong woman with me for emotional support. I was terrified about seeing my husband. I chanted affirmations in my head, 'I'm okay, I'll be okay' over and over to keep myself grounded. My friend took care of all my needs, making sure I had a cigarette whenever I needed one, as well as coffee and food.

The first day in front of the judge, I was put on the stand where I was questioned by my lawyer, then my husband's lawyer and finally by the children's lawyer. It was very scary to be questioned about all my past actions, and having to justify myself to everyone. It was over relatively quickly. After that we heard my

husband's account of our life together, and my parenting skills, then the child psychologist's opinions (which weren't very high) about my mental health and parenting ability and finally an independent psychiatrist who had seen me for an hour session some months earlier.

Three days later the judge awarded my husband full custody of our children. As the judge read his decision I felt my world collapsing. I couldn't hold back my tears as I sat listening to his judgement. As soon as he was done I bolted from the courtroom into my friend's arms. I couldn't take in anything my lawyer was saying. Strangely though, I was also relieved that it was over. I knew that I wasn't going to have another breakdown. I also knew that I wouldn't rely on my old ways of using alcohol and drugs to escape.

It didn't take long for me to realise that I now had a chance to focus on myself as a woman, not just as a mother. I would never have chosen this to happen but could see that I had a chance to really come to terms with my life up to, and from, this point. I recognised a lot of behaviour that I wanted to change.

Having said that, I still did not feel particularly happy inside myself. I was struggling to find peace. Then, in May 2004 I was introduced to Nichiren Buddhism. I embraced it immediately and felt my heart opening for what felt like the first time. Finding, and filling, the deep hole within, I now feel connected both internally and with the outside world. I have also found many friends with the same goals. I have been practising this Buddhism ever since and have finally found my inner peace.



Today I have a really happy life. My husband and I get on better than we ever did before. Our children are happy and we are positive about the future. My mental health has never been so stable. I can appreciate all the events of the past as imperative to me making positive changes for my life, and my children's lives.



Rachael's story

"I believe recovery is seeing yourself as valuable and portraying and demonstrating that."

Rachael is a New Zealand-born Samoan. She has four children and is active in her community.

My diagnosis is bipolar affective disorder and I have the tendency to suffer mania rather than depression. I get very high, very excitable, highly agitated but can still function well. The danger zone for me is not getting enough sleep.

I was first diagnosed at 28, when my daughter was two-and-a-half years old. I always knew something was not quite right with the way I thought, why I wouldn't sleep or became easily agitated and closed myself off from people. When I was diagnosed I thought, wow, that's what they call it. It was a relief.

The girls remember visiting the hospital, I had my boys with me when they were very young. The girls came to see me and I was able to get out a lot earlier. It was like, get me the sleep I need, get me the medication. I just need intervention. I was able to come home in the morning to be with the kids, get them off to wherever they were going and then go back to the hospital, then come back home in the evenings for a couple of hours.

Just because you have a mental illness does not mean you're not capable, that you can't contribute or that anything you do is not valued. I believe that recovery is seeing yourself as valuable and portraying and demonstrating that.

The last time I was unwell was June 2003 and my parents found that I was not improving under Western methods. They decided to get a *Fofo* – Samoan healer. They flew him over to New Zealand, from Samoa, and his specific purpose was to look after me.



For a week I didn't use any toxins. No alcohol, drugs, medication, soap or perfume. No washing dishes or working, you have to be clean. I enjoyed that. I thought, wow, I'm proud to be Samoan, I'm proud to be the daughter of my mother and father because they have been wonderful people to me. I felt really beautiful. The healer talked to my parents and my family, telling them that I am a good person, for over an hour. It made me feel really good.

I still have psychotherapy and very good support from the nurse with community mental health services. They are wonderful, beautiful Island women. They have empathy for my view on things. I get carer relief, so I can get away for a weekend. It works out to three days a month away from the children and they are looked after by a paid caregiver.

With the kids, I speak to them very similar to the way I speak with an adult. They know to talk to me if they are scared, or something doesn't seem right. They are very good at picking things up. I can tell my kids when I am tired and they will let me sleep for half an hour. I know that if I can get half an hour the horribleness is gone.

I belong to a group called 'The Helping Hand', an unregistered local charity. I am on the board of a Youth Health Service, a great bunch of people doing a really good job, dealing with teenagers and young adolescents who present as suicidal, depressed or manic. They know they have someone on the board who understands and we can talk about things that are going around or look at different ways of doing things.

I just keep looking forward one day at a time.



“Knowing,
nurturing
myself and
not being too
proud to ask
for help”

Cheri's story

Cheri has two daughters and lives with her husband. She has been working in the mental health sector for a number of years.

At 28 I was working for a government agency, helping Māori, particularly with their business and taxes. I was a very organised, structured person. When I fell pregnant I was a size 8-10. Before the nine months was up I was a size 22 and the pregnancy was shocking right through, with the changes to my body, and the interruption of my career.

I had a different midwife at the hospital to the one who had cared for me during the pregnancy. I had wanted a Māori midwife because they care beyond the delivery, there is more *manakatanga*, and there is a connection because you are Māori. I had a doctor I didn't know who, I later found out, was a trainee. The baby came early, at 38 weeks, and was just five pound 12 ounces.

Things started to deteriorate pretty much immediately. I got the baby blues in hospital and they didn't stop when I got home. I was crying constantly, feeling down and depressed. I couldn't breastfeed. The baby was so small she couldn't latch on. The midwife only visited once a week. I had read all the baby books but they did not help.

Mentally I got worse. I wanted to end my life. I didn't have any family support. My parents and siblings lived in Brisbane and my mother-in-law was in Dunedin. She offered to come and help but I didn't have a relationship with her. The Crisis Assessment and Treatment Team (CATT) gave me a 24-hour emergency phone number and sat with me for several hours on end to discuss my issues. I was eating for comfort. Sometimes I would take the baby out, walking around a crowded mall just being one of many.



I had to acknowledge that I needed support. My aunty lived locally and had a relationship with us. She stayed with us for a whole week and helped with the practicalities as well as giving guidance and *awhi*. She helped with the cleaning, and taught me how to look after my baby, showing me how to change her nappies, feed and bathe her.

I was becoming dependent on her though and was getting anxious about her week ending but knew I could ring her.

I had postnatal depression for the next three years, continued to take Prozac and was up and down on a weekly basis, but I was feeling mentally stronger. I had a second child without any depression issues at all. With my second pregnancy I was determined I wouldn't go through depression again.

My second baby was born at 40 weeks, weighing a healthy nine pound 12 ounces. I was healthier leading up to the pregnancy and afterwards. I had a really good midwife and a close friend with me in the delivery room. My two aunties, my seven-year-old daughter and my husband were also at the hospital.

When I got home I was relaxed. I knew what I was doing. The baby was latching easily and she was content. She was getting full, going to sleep and doing what babies do. There was no hint of depression or not coping.

I had trusting people who cared for me genuinely. I didn't know I would have postnatal depression, the traumatic abuse I experienced as a child may have contributed, but I was able to rectify the second birth by knowing and nurturing myself and not being too proud to ask for help. A lot of Māori women out there, doing well and seen by other members of their family as being switched on, or coping, ignore or dismiss help. I thought I could do this like a tax return with my eyes closed, but HELLO.



Donna's story

"I see my kids from time to time, not as much as I'd like though."

Donna has three grown-up children and is a grandmother and is currently working with a new peer support service. She identifies as Māori.

I was looking after a young baby as well as my two daughters who were nine and 11. My 13-year-old son wasn't living with me at the time and was having problems. Things built up to a point where I just snapped, gave in under the weight of everything and tried to take my own life several times. A very supportive friend of mine took me to see a doctor and it was obvious that I needed to go into hospital. My friend picked up the pieces, doing what needed to be done for the kids.

When I came out of hospital I started taking medication and was very nervous about having the kids back with me. I asked for help from every avenue I could think of, CYFs, counselling services, Adolescent and Child Services, Barnados, Open Home Foundation but they were all reluctant to get involved. They could only offer short-term help to give me a break. I continued with counselling and my friend took the kids from time to time. She was really helpful and supportive, like an advocate.

CYFs kept saying that there were other families with more dire circumstances that needed their attention when I repeatedly asked them for help. Eventually I moved to another town but my children stayed, under the care of CYFs, but I was still their guardian. CYFs didn't offer any support in my relationship with my kids and nothing was explained to them either. I kept telling them that I wanted to be involved with my children and asked if they could be transferred down to where I was living but was told no. I was told to write things down which would then be handed to a counsellor who my daughter was seeing for them to



talk about. The counsellor gave my daughter what I had written which exposed her to a whole lot of stuff that wasn't suitable for an 11-year-old. It destroyed any possibility of a mother-daughter relationship.

I was frustrated at not having contact with my kids. My other daughter was missing me a lot and wanted to spend time with me. She ran away to move closer to where I was so we were able to see each other. Her sister had gone off the rails by then and wanted nothing to do with me or CYFs. My son had disappeared to live on the street so for the next few years I concentrated on my wellbeing, and became involved with consumer issues. My children never lived with me again.

I managed to get out of the system, seeing my GP regularly as well as counselling, and started feeling better about myself. My youngest daughter was still very angry with me about lots of things and it's taken her a number of years to come around to seeing me how I am. My son went on to have a child of his own who ended up in CYFs care as well. As the grandmother I went to meet with CYFs with my partner and was very open about having a mental illness. I was cancelled out from having anything to do with my grandchild.

I am now in a stable long-term relationship with a woman who has two teenagers and we all get on extremely well. They're totally aware that I need medication and they've adapted really well. We all work together like an average family household with two parents, despite both being women. I see my kids from time to time, not as much as I'd like though. One of my daughters moved closer to me and now has two children of her own. She visits regularly. My grandchild is out of CYFs and in foster care now and I'm still battling to have access and rights.

The right and ability to parent children should still be maintained as best it can and the kids should be involved in the process. Maintaining the environment is really important, staying in the same house, kids at the same school, keeping the routine. I think grandparents are also part of the family model and that regardless of mental illness, diabetes, cancer or whatever, they should still have input and rights.



Sarah P's story

"My son has been an integral part of me, it was so important for me not to lose him."

Sarah is a solo parent and has a teenage son. She is currently employed as a peer development worker.

I was nine years old when I was first diagnosed and prescribed psychotropic medication and had frequent contact with mental health services until I was about 14. I have had to deal with a lot of stigma and discrimination at school as well as from other people in the local area who knew of my problems. This was really painful for me.

When I became a parent as a teenager myself, I didn't want it widely known that I had experience of mental illness and went to considerable lengths to conceal it. I felt that getting help from mental health services wouldn't actually be helpful to me at that time and that it would increase the risk of losing custody of my child which would make things much worse.

I developed a set of strategies aimed at proving I was mentally fit and healthy to the casual observer while minimising the risk of putting myself in a situation where I might lose control. The motivation for me to develop a system for managing myself came from a strong desire not to lose my son. I was surrounded by people who were only too willing to take him from me.

I've read endless books on mental illness, self-help and strategies on how to be happier. The key things for me were keeping the house tidy and having markers that I could check for myself like sleeping enough, eating enough and getting regular exercise which has been something I've struggled with all the way.

I avoid alcohol and hardly drink at all because drinking often leads me to a dangerous and reckless frame of mind.

I have some wonderful friends who have been instrumental in helping me develop a sound philosophy that guides the way I live my life now.

I was brought up Catholic but turned away from it because I perceived it to be an anti-women religion. Now I think that Christian principles are actually quite sound.

In 1992 I became involved in an organisation called Vincent's Art Workshop, in a support role, which was initially set up during de-institutionalisation as a place in the community for people to come and make art and be social. Most of my perceptions about mental health services had come from my experiences in the 70s when things were a bit different than they are now.

I work in the mental health sector because of my own life experience and interest in what it means to have a mental illness. I am now working towards developing new understandings about what is the most helpful way to respond to mental illness and how to help people develop strategies that will enable them to be healthy as opposed to just controlling them so they're no longer a nuisance to anybody else, which is, in my opinion, what clinical mental health services are doing. My son has been an integral part of me, it was so important for me not to lose him.

I don't actually believe in mental illness per se, I think of it more as being a continuum with mental health at one end and mental illness at the other. I believe that irrespective of whether a formal diagnosis has been made, everyone moves along the line and it depends on whether we have enough sleep, food, people we care about who we can talk to about the important things. Are we able to take care of business, pay the rent, taxes, bills, keep our space tidy and functional, all those things in life that need to be done.

If any or all of these things are neglected for any reason we move closer to the mental illness end of the continuum, if those things are attended to we operate closer to the mental health end of the continuum.



Vito's story

"My mental illness does not change how I am as a parent. I am no less a parent with mental illness than I would be without."

Vito is a New Zealand-born Samoan currently working for a District Health Board. He has one son.

I wrote my first suicide note at the age of 11, but it was not until my 20s that it became obvious I had significant problems. After another suicide attempt I was diagnosed with bipolar disorder.

We were quite self-focused with problems experienced in the Samoan community and I experienced a lot of them, so I rebelled against our culture. Going to church and being the Holy Christian when I was so depressed made me feel like the most evil person around. I got mixed up with a bad crowd. I was a loner, foreign to Pacific Islanders whose family unit works together and embraces one another.

I became a radio deejay to avoid dealing with people. I thought it was the perfect job for me at the time but it actually aggravated the isolation I felt outside the radio booth.

I attempted suicide more frequently and I got into self-harming as well. My last suicide attempt brought me to the attention of mental health services.

There was quite a lot of shame within my family about me being in a psychiatric hospital. For Pacific Islanders if one member of the family is sick then the whole family is affected. My mother didn't want to see me for a long time. My father was quite supportive as were a couple of other family members, but they didn't want anybody else outside my immediate family to know I was in hospital.

My father's church was probably the first to find out and was really supportive. That was the first connection I felt with the church. The church supported my family in supporting me. The fact that they didn't discriminate against my family



made it a lot easier for my parents to be more open to the fact that I'd been affected by mental illness.

I went through the trials and tribulations of medication. I remember the first time I was sedated, waking up the next day and not being able to speak, slurring and spitting when I tried. While I was receiving mental health services I started accessing the Pacific Island community organisations that provide support. I was exposed to other Pacific Islanders who had experienced mental illness so there was a connection.

It was also difficult being on the wards and having a child. I didn't get many opportunities to see him, when I went home on the weekends I was often quite sedated and spent most of the time asleep, so I was hardly of any use as a father. I remember one time when my sister brought my son to the ward. Like most wards there was a long stretch of corridor and I was walking down one end as my son and sister approached from the other. I remember feeling bad for what I was subjecting him to. I tried to change from that point to make things better for him and not subject him as much to my own personal shortcomings.

I still have the odd wildly swinging mood and have accessed services in the last year or so but they're not as extreme as they once were. I have good supports in place. I can feel it coming on so I know to talk to my partner or family. I have particular activities that help me manage how I'm feeling. I still experience some serious depressive swings but often not for months.

These days my son plays quite a key role. He is a great 'brown wire', earthing me, but sometimes I succumb to the 'symptoms' and it is hard not to be self-obsessed. My mental illness does not change how I am as a parent. I am no less a parent with a mental illness than I would be without. I sometimes wonder 'what if he grows up and turns out just like me?'. I guess if I do my job right though and he does go down that track, then at least he would benefit not only from the supports of good services but from having a father who has been there too.



Diane's story

"I'm open with my daughters now, they all know what I've done and where I've been."

Diane has three daughters and seven grandchildren. She lives with her husband and her mother and is active in a number of community organisations.

I have been a service user for 37 years starting when I was 15 years old. I spent my youth, from 15 until I was 20, in a psychiatric hospital. I have had a number of diagnoses, including depression, dissociation, post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety and stress.

I had my first child not long after I was released from the hospital. My life up until then had been a psychiatric hospital. When I was about three months pregnant I went to the GP with what I now know is depression and because I cried there he told me to go back to hospital because I was sick. I stayed for two weeks and left because I wasn't committed this time. A lot of issues came up for me at this time, the physical abuse I had endured as a child and the sexual abuse. I was determined to keep my child safe but afraid I would end up doing damage.

After my second child I had a two-year period of post-partum depression and psychosis. My partner would ring me from his work to remind me to feed the baby, because I didn't remember things like that. He kept me at home, out of hospital, and that was probably the best thing he could have done, not many men would be able to do all that he did. He had a full-time job, then would come home and run the house as well because I wasn't able to get out of bed or cook or do washing or get the kids' lunches ready. There is home help available but it is only for six weeks and the person comes in while you do your housework rather than coming in to take over, accessing help is really difficult for consumers. Because my partner is in a wheelchair we can access home help through a service for people with physical disabilities and we have a review just once a year to make sure he still uses a wheelchair.

At one stage it was suggested that the children be put into Karitane care but I knew I'd have to face it and learn how to parent one day. I didn't talk to them about my mental illness when they were growing up and would never have told anyone I had been in hospital. It would have helped my children and it would have helped me too, instead I had to hide who I really was. They were alright until their teenage years and then they lost patience with me being unwell.

I'm open with my daughters now, they all know what I've done and where I've been so it's easier for them to talk to me. One daughter will ring me when she's not coping because I know what that's like. I'm not hiding it from my grandchildren either. One good thing I've found is that by being open myself it has allowed two nieces to talk to me about their own mental illnesses. I think it's sad though that I know more about these girls' lives than their biological parents.

It is important for children to have some sort of plan so they know what happens when something goes wrong. My children didn't know who to approach when I got unwell and my partner was not home, or who it was safe to ring. My children were scared by the stories they'd heard about Social Welfare.

Some people really helped me get well and maintain wellness. I had an excellent GP for 27 years and knew that if I got unwell I could just go to him. Sometimes they know you better than psychiatrists because you might not see the psychiatrist as often.

I've made some fantastic friends who are also consumers and I respect them immensely and love them dearly. If I was ever in need of help I would definitely approach them first because I know they would tell me the truth and have my best interests at heart. Most of these consumer friends are also parents and excellent ones at that!



“I have rekindled the hope that I thought had died, and now my son is back with me full-time.”

Lucy's story

Lucy is the mother of a 12-year-old son. She is actively involved in the mental health sector. She identifies as Māori.

I was 24 when I left my husband and I became involved in another relationship pretty much straight away. I took my three-and-a-half-year-old son and moved away from my home town leaving all my supports behind. I had always felt quite depressed but it got much worse when I started to drink daily. I also started to realise that my relationship was severely abusive. I was binge drinking so much that I was being hospitalised every time I drank. I took overdoses and cut myself. I was hospitalised regularly and had a desperate urge to just not be there.

My drinking got severely worse and I was secretive about it. I was being treated by mental health services and seeing a psychologist at this time and told her that I had to drink before coming. She told me she couldn't help me, that I needed to go to Alcohol and Drug (A & D) services and that I was neglecting my son and couldn't care for him on my own. A couple of weeks later I made it to an Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) meeting. The people there said I needed professional help because I was having a lot of difficulty stopping. I got help at A & D services and managed to get sober. My doctor put me back on anti-depressants, and my counsellor organised for me to go to residential treatment.

My counsellor sent me to Hamner Springs and advised me to go off all medication. When I got there they asked if I'd attempted suicide and when I told them I had they asked why I was off my medication. They told me to tell them if I started to feel suicidal but when I did it happened quite quickly and I felt ashamed for failing the programme so I didn't say anything. I relapsed as soon as I came out of treatment. Years later I was diagnosed with major depression, clinical depression and alcoholism in remission. I also suffered from panic attacks.

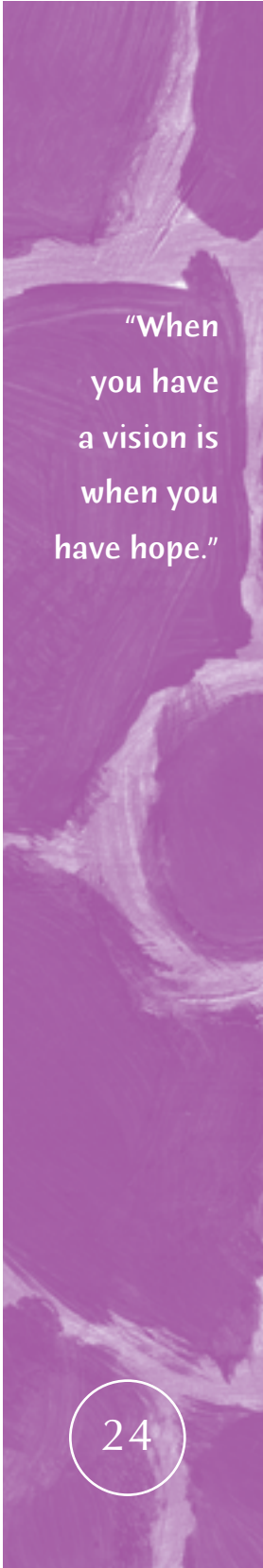
If it wasn't for AA I would have died, they were very supportive although some of them believed that using medication wasn't part of the 12-step programme. The medication stopped my suicidal thoughts but I felt like a failure for not working the programme and either way I wasn't winning. I felt bad because I still couldn't look after my son and I blamed myself and lost so much self-esteem.

During these times my parents and my son's father looked after him. His father obtained full custody and I lacked confidence to fight to get him back. My son would come to me in the holidays, then his father said, 'you can have him back' and I got really scared and I thought 'oh my god I am just getting well'.

The community worker became my case manager and organised for me to have plans for when my son arrived. We identified places to go and things that I needed to do and gave me the option to have a support worker for longer. I got a housekeeper through mental health and talked with Open Homes. We put things into place, prevention-wise rather than the cure at the end of the crisis.

I have been working as a part-time Consumer Advisor and am now training in mental health management. I am back in my home town and have made friends and met lots of people through work who encourage me as a parent, a co-worker and a person. I have rekindled the hope that I thought had died, and now my son is back with me full-time. Two years ago I couldn't see to the next day and now I have moved from surviving to thriving.





“When
you have
a vision is
when you
have hope.”

Vaiula's story

Vaiula is a New Zealand-born Samoan mother of five children. She works for a mental health service provider as a support worker and is studying in order to be a social worker.

I was diagnosed with bipolar disorder when I was about 27 years old. My mum, dad and older sister had passed away when I was very young. I had also been molested and abused, physically and sexually. I had suffered a lot.

In the early stages of my illness I had extreme mood swings, crying one minute, laughing the next then crying again. I was the breadwinner, made all the decisions and put the kids through school, but I didn't know who I was and my biggest fear was losing control. I lost my mind and I lost myself physically when I became agoraphobic.

It damaged a lot of my life, it damaged myself, it damaged my family and my children were really fearful of me in my early stages of being unwell. However, as time's gone on my five children and my moko, siblings, parents and son-in-law have been my tower of strength. I would also like to thank our heavenly father for guiding me through this journey.

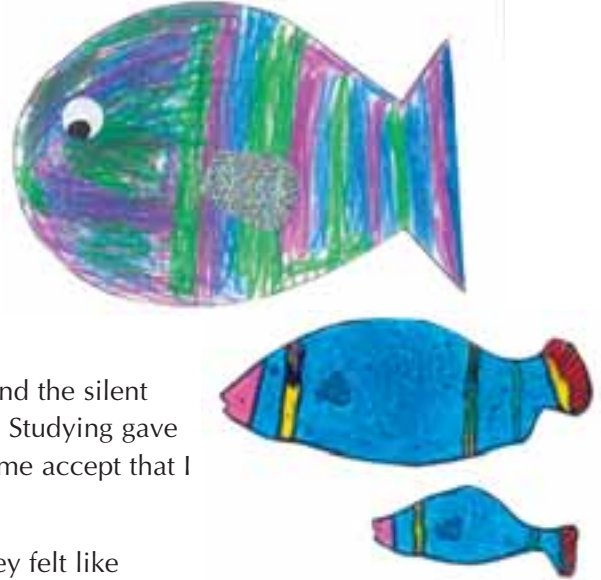
When you have a vision is when you have hope, but when you have no vision for your future you have no hope for yourself or your family. I hope to have my children back one day when I can. I want to work so hard to give my children a better future and to say to them your mum has an illness but this is where your mum is today.

I decided to study and help other people, so I applied at Blueprint, a private training centre in Porirua, for the Level 4 Mental Health National Certificate in October 2003. I was 35 years old. I continued working part time, as a support worker for a charitable trust community rehabilitation centre, while I studied, becoming full-time around June 2004.

There were only two consumers in the class but we had the opportunity to share our personal experience. Sitting in the classroom with these people gave me hope. They let me have my say and understood where I was coming from. I felt accepted. Learning about society, attitudes, stigma, and the silent stigma in the workplace, made me more determined. Studying gave me broader horizons and understanding and helped me accept that I have a mental illness.

I was sad when the class came to an end because they felt like my whānau. It is so important that people close to me know and understand where I am coming from.

I am now doing Social Service training at University of Te Wananga. I plan to be a social worker and my determination is to change Samoan and Pacific Island attitudes about mental health. They find it really hard to understand mental illness because they cannot see a physical defect. Pacific Island people think mental illness is from demons or sins of the forefathers, a curse for something done in the past that causes people to suffer. They use the term vale, which means sick or crazy. I want them to understand that mental illness can be from a lot of things like a separation, death in the family, a traumatic experience that you couldn't deal with then that catches up with you. This is where my heart is. I think it is important for all of us to believe in ourselves, to be able to take action, to have vision and hope. Just because you have a mental illness doesn't mean you can't do anything. I believe we must utilise everything we have to realise our full potential.



Mary's story

"If I need help then I'm going to get it. I have to look after me before I look after them."

Mary is solo parenting two school-aged boys. She is active in a number of parents' support groups.

I am one of four children and had a very privileged upbringing. When I finished at high school I went overseas. I ended up in London where I met my husband-to-be. In 1994 we got married and had James. Twelve weeks later I got arthritis. We continued travelling for a while then decided to move to New Zealand. Tom was born in 1996. Twelve weeks later the arthritis returned. The doctor also told me I had postnatal depression. I was put on anti-depressants and steroids which mixed badly and I became hypo-manic. I'd been seeing a psychiatrist. My GP thought I had manic depression but my psychiatrist thought it was a reaction from the steroids and anti-depressants.

At two years old Tom started being quite destructive. I knew something was wrong but the doctor told me I was neurotic and overreacting. I asked for him to be referred to a specialist. After a year of tests Tom was diagnosed with severe autism. I'd never heard of it and they told me it couldn't be fixed.

Tom had what's called sensory sensitivity and would strip naked because he couldn't stand wearing clothes. He also put holes through the walls, broke windows and constantly flooded the house. He tried to escape the whole time so we had to put locks on all the windows and doors.

I didn't know I had a condition at that stage. According to the doctor I had depression. I just couldn't cope. Every one to three months I had an emotional breakdown. I'd drink too much or smoke pot because I needed a break from reality.



I was a prisoner in my own home. I couldn't take Tom out and it was very hard to get babysitters to come back twice. After a while my boyfriend told me he couldn't deal with the situation any more so my kids went up to my parents for a week but they couldn't cope. The kids went to their dad and I was very stressed out because he wanted custody. I lost my children and my boyfriend and ended up in hospital. I was told I'd never get the children back because of how I was. I realised that I had to sort myself out.

I had lists with basic things like, get up, have shower, get dressed, have breakfast. Getting used to the medication was hard. I've had to accept that Tom is autistic and remind myself of that when he does things that wind me up.

In March 2003 I went back into hospital for four weeks. I got James back from his father in the third term and Tom in the fourth term and realised I couldn't cope on my own so every second weekend Tom goes to IHC. It was hard at first because he hated it but he loves it now. I realised James needs a life too. For so many years I was just surviving and James really suffered.

The hardest thing about getting out of hospital was not having anyone at home to help so I increased my mortgage and got a lady to come in every day during the week while the kids were at school. I'm starting a support group through the Autism Association for mothers of children with special needs.

Tom is eight now and has come so far. James is 10 and I've got 10 years to make these children the best they can be and if I need help then I'm going to get it. I have to look after me before I can look after them, have early nights, make sure I take my pills every day, eat sensibly and not party too much. Last year I started to freak out a bit so I asked a couple of friends to keep an eye on me, if I'm acting a bit strange they can tell me and if I don't listen they can ring my nurse. Sleep and stress are two main factors for me. My lifestyle has changed dramatically but I am a much happier person.





Where to get parenting help

Parenting poses many different types of challenges. But practical help or advice is available, and although it can be difficult sometimes to ask for help, one or more of the agencies listed here could be useful if you want support.

FURTHER INFORMATION

We have taken great care in preparing this information however Kites Trust and /or the Mental Health Commission cannot accept any legal responsibility for errors or omissions.

CONSUMER MOVEMENT AND PEER SUPPORT

Auckland Regional Consumer Network

Consumer network for people living north of the Bombay Hills

762 Mt Eden Road
PO Box 10-256
Dominion Road
Auckland

Ph. 09 623 1762
Fax. 09 623 1763 *(will accept collect calls)*
Email. office@rcnet.co.nz

Southern Consumer Network Trust

Consumer network for people living in the South Island

PO Box 13167
Christchurch

Ph 03 365 4046
Fax. 03 365 4047
Email. scas@xtra.co.nz

Central Potential Inc.

Consumer network for people living in the lower North Island.

PO Box 9762
Marion Square
Wellington

Ph. 0800 837 486
Ph. 04 382 9600
Fax. 04 384 3308

Midland Regional Consumer Advisory Group

Covers the midland region of the North Island.
For further information contact:

Mana Mental Health Services Ltd
1199 Amohia Street
Rotorua

Ph. 07 343 9082
Fax. 07 343 6754
Email. awhi4u@clear.net.nz

PARENTING

Barnardos New Zealand National Office

85-87 Ghuznee Street
PO Box 6434
Wellington

Ph. 04 385 7560
Fax. 04 382 6700

Barnardos Kid Start

Home-based care where caregivers provide care in their own homes. Locally based, flexible hours and useful for working parents or those needing relief care.

Ph. 0800 543 782



Birthright NZ

Birthright is a national organisation, which works to support, strengthen and advocate for one parent families.

PO Box 6302, Te Aro
Wellington

Ph. 04 802 5377
Fax. 04 385 4698

Citizens Advice Bureau

Provides free, impartial and confidential advice on all matters including information, personal problems and budgeting.

Ph. 0800 367 222
Website. www.cab.org.nz

Fair-Centre

Produces easy to read information sheets on a range of issues affecting families.

Website. www.faircentre.org.nz

Ph. 0800 222 345 to talk to a trained operator for family related information and advice.

Open Home Foundation

Christian child and family support service providing support for families under stress or in crisis. Respite, short term and long term solutions for children and young people from birth upwards.

National Office
PO Box 31036
Lower Hutt

Ph. 04 586 1077

Parents Centres NZ Inc.

Parents Centres offer parenting education, deliver childbirth education and provide postnatal support and information for members.

PO Box 54-128
Mana

Ph. 04 233 2022
Fax. 04 233 2063

Website. www.parentscentre.org.nz

Plunket

A free service to assist families with advice for children under five. Home visits, coffee mornings and playgroups.

National Office
Level 5, Payroll House
126-132 Lambton Quay
PO Box 5474
Wellington

Ph. 04 471 0177
Plunket Line. 0800 933 922

Parent Help

Offers 24-hour telephone support line.

Ph. 0800 568 856

SF National

Supporting Families in mental illness.
Branches throughout New Zealand offering family and whanau support, education and advocacy.

National Office

PO Box 593

Christchurch

Ph. 03 366 1909

Fax. 03 379 2322

Website. www.sfnat.org.nz

Skylight

New Zealand agency supporting children and young people who are facing change, loss and grief. It also supports those caring for them such as families, friends and professionals.

PO Box 7309

Wellington

Ph. 04 939 6767

Ph. 0800 299 100

Website. www.skylight.org.nz

KITES TRUST

Wellington-based community development organisation. Kites have developed an information pack for parents and workers, which includes a Kids Care Plan.

Level 6, Education House

178 Willis Street

Kites Trust

PO Box 9392

Marion Square

Wellington

Ph. 04 384 3303

Fax. 04 384 3308

Email. admin@kites.org.nz

MENTAL HEALTH INFORMATION AND SERVICES

For information about local mental health services contact your local health practitioner.

Mental Health Foundation of New Zealand

For written information and resources contact the resource and information center.

Ph. 09 300 7030

Fax. 09 300 7020

Website. www.mentalhealth.org.nz

